campus social
Revista Lusófona de Ciências Sociais
2005, 2: 27-38

Current issues in social work theory

Malcolm Payne*

Introduction: discourses on social work

I want to talk about four main issues about social work theory that have been current over the past few years:

- Who sets the agenda about social work theory?
- What are the aims of social work and its practice ?
- How do we decide what practice theory is useful?
- How do we connect theory to practice?

I find that a useful way of dealing with these questions is to see social work as constructed by a series of interacting discourses, so first I want to talk briefly about what I mean by the term 'discourse', because this is used in different ways. Discourses are social interactions, that is, interactions between people and sometimes groups of people (Fairclough, 1992). Their interactions are expressed in language, which enables people in social groups and societies to build up a shared understanding of the meaning of pieces of behaviour. So, people understand what social work is because other people explain it to them, or because in discussing the world, they gain an impression of what it is, or they actually experience it, perhaps as a client, or as it affects a relative or as part of their involvement in a social agency.

The language is important in any discourse. For example, the Oxford English Dictionary (Simpson and Weiner, 1989) explains ideas by giving examples of how the words are used. One of the examples it gives about social work is from the famous British novelist Barbara Pym, written in 1977, The phrase she uses is: 'A real bossy social-worker type'. This real piece of language usage shows that in Britain, the image 'social worker' can be used to imply interfering, officious or bossy behaviour. So it is not only formal dictionary definitions, or official or professional writings that define social work, but everyday usages like this. If people accept this image, they might treat you as a social worker with caution because you might interfere with their wishes or be dictatorial. Discourses may include actions, discussion and writing because meaning is demonstrated by what people do as well as what they say and write. All social meaning is expressed in language, and therefore the language used both constructs and reveals discourses. So the quotation from Barbara Pym reveals what people already think, and hardens it up in the reader's mind as an agreed view of social workers.

* Emeritus Professor, Manchester Metropolitan University. Director, Psycho-social and Spiritual Care St. Christopher's Hospice, London.

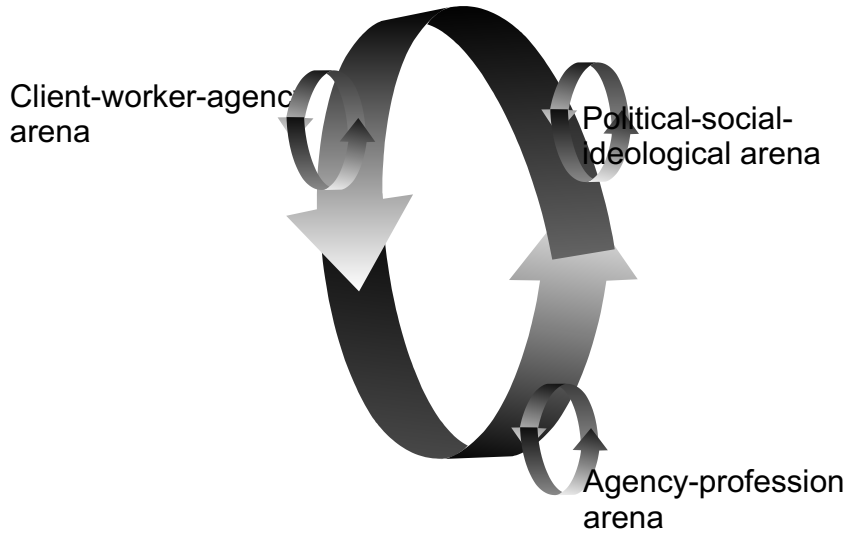
People using this language in this way many hundreds of times in our social experiences creates a consensus about the general reality of what 'social work' means.

With these ideas in mind, let us turn to the four issues that I mentioned.

Who sets the agenda?

My first issue raises the question of who sets the agenda for social work theory. Who says what theory should be and do, and by implication what social work should be and do? Here are some possibilities: social work might set the agenda, or social work agencies, social work clients, or politicians and policy-makers? We might also ask whether these stakeholders – people who hold a stake or have an interest in the answers – are groups with coherent and agreed aims and views. There are many groups of social workers, many interest groups within agencies, many clients or groups in society that generate clients, and many politicians and policy-makers. Each of these subgroups might hold different views and would give different answers to these questions.

Figure 1 - Arenas of social construction of socialwork



My approach to this issue is to look at discourses about social work and where they take place: I argue that there are three main arenas of discourse set out in Fig 1. Each arena influences the others. One is a political-social-philosophical arena, in which social and

political debate forms the policy that guides agencies and the purposes that are set, or develop for themselves. That is where social ideas like Barbara Pym's bossiness infiltrates ideas about social work, but more often discourse in this arena takes place between politicians, or in the media. A recent example in Britain is the publication of a report about failings in the health and social services and the police in protecting a child who was killed by people caring for her, Victoria Climbié (Laming, 2003). This led to a lot of media comment about social work and its organisation, and to official responses to the recommendations for organisational change and new procedures to protect children. Similar events have contributed over many years to views about social work and child protection (Parton, 1985). Social workers engage in this through professional associations and other organisations, their involvement in social issues, as activists, voters or writers, and through the influence of their agencies. We also contribute through everyday life with other people. We *are* social work, we represent it by who we are and how we behave.

Another arena is an agency-professional arena in which employers and collective organisations of employees, such as trade unions and professional associations, engage in influencing each other about the more specific elements of how social work will operate. This includes how agencies make policy, and it interacts with the political-social-philosophical arena.

The third arena is the agency-worker-client arena, which is the most important arena for how social work emerges from out practice. Three sets of forces construct social work: those that create and control social work as an occupation; those that create people as clients who seek or are sent for social work help; and those which create the social context in which social work is practised. Evans and Kearney (1996) describe these as the central triangular relationship between worker, client and agency. Social work is a special activity where people interact in special social roles as 'social worker' and 'client'. Understanding social work involves examining the factors that establish the social positions of these actors in a complex of social relationships.

What are the aims of social work and its practice?

Let us look more closely at the social work professional debate about its nature, because this tells us about the internal view of what social work is about. As I have suggested, there will never be a final answer to the debates that we are always having. We will never say finally that says social work is one thing, but we can see by looking at the discourse the sort of area in which it operates and the sort of issues that it faces. By saying what the discourse is about, we establish the area in which social work operates. The idea of social construction tells us that the answers to our question will vary according to the time, social conditions and cultures where we ask these questions, because these times, social conditions and cultures contribute to the construction of social work, as workers, clients and agencies interact with each other (Burr, 2003). Nonetheless, taking part in social work requires a view about your particular balance between these aims - your own construction, which guides the actions you

take. It includes values appropriate to doing social work, and theories about the nature of social work; for example, sociological theories about its role in society, or its relationships with other occupational groups. This analysis helps social workers to think through their view in general, and also to see what balance of views they might take on in a piece of work.

Figure 2 presents three views (Payne, 1996) of social work at the corners of a triangle; the triangle represents a discourse between them. The important differences between these views of social work connect with different political views about how welfare should be provided.

• *Reflexive-therapeutic views.* Dominelli (2002) calls these therapeutic helping approaches. These see social work as seeking the best possible well-being for individuals, groups and communities in society, by promoting and facilitating growth and self-fulfilment. Clients gain power over their own feelings and way of life. Through this personal power, they are enabled to overcome or rise above suffering and disadvantage. This view expresses in social work the social democratic political philosophy that economic and social development should go hand-in-hand to achieve individual and social improvement.

This view is basic to many ideas of the nature of social work, but two other views modify and dispute it:

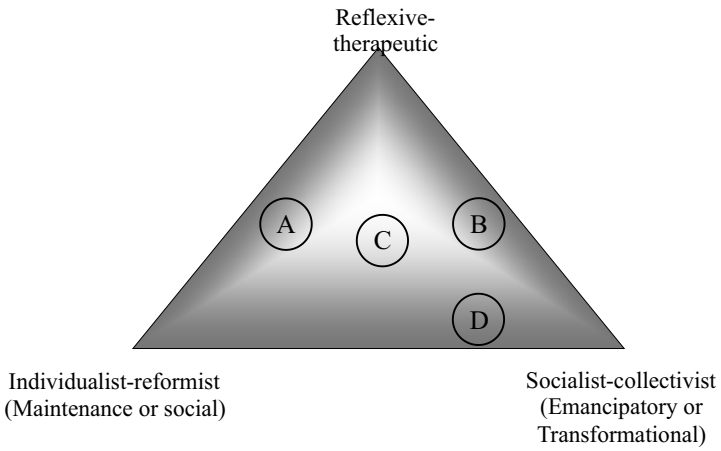
• *Socialist-collectivist views.* These see social work as seeking cooperation and mutual support in society so that the most oppressed and disadvantaged people can gain power over their own lives. Dominelli (2002) calls these emancipatory approaches because they free people from oppression. This view expresses the socialist political philosophy that planned economies and social provision promotes equality and social justice

• *Individualist-reformist views.* These see social work as an aspect of welfare services to individuals in societies. It meets individuals' needs and improves services of which it is a part, so that social work and the services can operate more effectively. Dominelli (2002) calls these maintenance approaches. They see social work as maintaining the social order and social fabric of society, and maintaining people during any period of difficulties that they may be experiencing, so that they can recover stability again. This view expresses the liberal or rational economic political philosophy, that personal freedom in economic markets, supported by the rule of law, is the best way of organising societies.

Each view says something about the activities and purposes of social work in welfare provision in any society. These different views fit together or compete with each other in social work practice. Looking at Fig 2, if you or your agency were positioned at A (very common especially for beginning social workers), your main focus might be providing services in a therapeutic, helping relationship, as a care manager (in managed care) or in child protection. You might do very little in the way of seeking to change the world, and by being part of an official or service system, you are accepting the pattern of welfare services as it is. However,

in your individual work, what you do may well be guided by eventual change objectives. For example, if you believe that relationships between men and women should be more equal, your work in families will probably reflect your views. Position B might represent someone working in a refuge for women suffering domestic violence. Much of their work is helping therapeutically, but the very basis of their agency is changing attitudes towards women in society, and you might do some campaigning work as part of your helping role. Position C is equally balanced; some change, some service provision; some therapeutic helping. My present job is like that: to promote community development so that communities become more resilient about and respond better to people who are dying or bereaved, but I also provide help for individuals and I am responsible for liaison with other services so that our service system becomes more effective. Position D is mainly transformational but partly maintenance. This reflects the reality that seeking social change is not, in the social services, completely revolutionary, but will also seek to make the service system more effective. Many community workers, for example, are seeking quite major change in the lives of the people they serve by achieving better co-operation and sharing, but they may act by helping local groups make their area safe from crime, by providing welfare rights advocacy or by organising self-help playgroups in the school holidays.

Figure 2 - Discourse on the future of social work



Political aims in welfare, views of social work and particular practice theories link in complex ways. The links between, say liberal or rational political theory and individualist-reformist social work, and task-centred practice are clear, but the devisors of task-centred practice did not identify themselves as political liberals, and seek to devise a theory that expressed their idea about the nature of social work. They did research, came up with an approach that seemed to work, and present it to social workers to use. When we set it alongside

other theories, we can see that it meets some of the aims and philosophies of social work, and not some of the others.

How do we decide what is effective?

My third issue raises the question of what theories might be most useful to use in practice. Of course, the answer will depend on what kind of social work we are trying to do, and our aims. But there have been debates about effectiveness going on over the past few years. One debate is between four views of how we should use knowledge within social work:

- Evidence-based practice (EBP);
- Social construction;
- Empowerment;
- Critical realism.

EBP (Gomm and Davies, 2000) is informed by knowledge that has been gathered and tested empirically in the most rigorous ways possible to provide evidence of the form of action that is most likely to achieve its objectives for the benefit of and according to the wishes of the people or social groups served. Questions are raised about who is to judge which research is credible. Generally, supporters of EBP focus on research that is very objective, in which the researcher stands outside the situation and observes it independently. The theory of practice that most strongly represents this view of knowledge is cognitive-behavioural theory. In this theory, clear objectives for changes in the client's thinking or behaviour are set, and procedures for getting to client to change are used. For example, you analyse the behaviour of thinking in detail, so that you can set targets for change, and encourage clients to practice the changes between sessions with them.

Social construction theories propose that understandings about the world come from interactions between people as part of many interchanges in a social, cultural and historical context (Karvinen, et al 1999). An important issue for social construction is to engage people who are being helped or whose lives you are researching in an equal relationship with researchers, so you can explore complex understandings about their human situation may be from different points of view. The outcomes of your practice or research should represent as full a picture of complex human situations as possible. Social constructionists argue that supporters of EBP produce results that do not reflect this rich, complex reality. It is even naïve; a wider range of methods that examine how people make sense of the social situations that they face is more helpful (White, 1997). The social and historical context in which situations develop and knowledge is researched must have an important impact on our understandings of individuals, society and research as a source of knowledge. An important idea is 'tacit knowledge', the practical understanding of how things work in our social arrangements, which is often not turned into formal, researched knowledge (Polanyi, 1958).

Empowerment views argue that knowledge primarily comes from clients and that, to

be ethical, social workers should use knowledge according to clients' wishes in order to empower them further (Beresford and Croft, 2001). In social work, these ideas are associated particularly with social and community development, ethnic sensitivity, empowerment and advocacy theories.

Empowerment theories argue two things:

• The purposes of social work require workers to seek social justice (a socialist-collectivist position) and therefore to empower people by responding to their knowledge and understanding about the world.
• Clients (often in this view called consumers or users of services) have the best knowledge about their circumstances and objectives, which should therefore be followed.

These views give priority to the views and wishes of service users. Since they are often oppressed, disadvantaged and marginalised, empowerment views of knowledge argue that their understanding of their situation should be what guides social work practice. Feminist social workers argue that social workers reinforce oppression of women through the role of social work in surveillance and enforcement of conventional patriarchal relationships (Dominelli, 2002).

Critical realist views are a fairly new perspective and argue that evidence of reality is not always available to empirical observation, so that knowledge *emerges* or is generated from human interpretations of successions of events that can be captured empirically (Morén and Blom, 2003). This particular view of realism seeks to question taken-for-granted assumptions about theory and research, and this connects the ideas to critical social science theory, which tries to achieve this critical position.

Realist views argue that social phenomena exist beyond social constructions (Houston, 2002), but that the constructions are nevertheless important to understand. Archer (1995) proposes that existing social constructions form the social context within which new social constructions are formed. As these emerge, they form a new social context within which continued social construction takes place. This model of this process makes it clear that, of course, social construction does not only bring about change, but also may lead to reproduction; that is, the present social construction is maintained. Constructions form a stable reality to the people involved. You would expect this because the existing social order is hard to change. So, social construction does not, as its critics often say, always lead to instability, uncertainty and constant change. Usually it leads to stability and continuity. This makes it possible to use positivist research to some extent, but within an awareness that there are lots of complexities and possibilities.

This concept of *emergence* is important in understanding the realist critique of EBP, which often ignores emergent properties. EBP assumes either that we can observe everything that exists or that what actually happens is all that might happen. However, we cannot empirically observe everything, though we can see some information that suggests what might be going

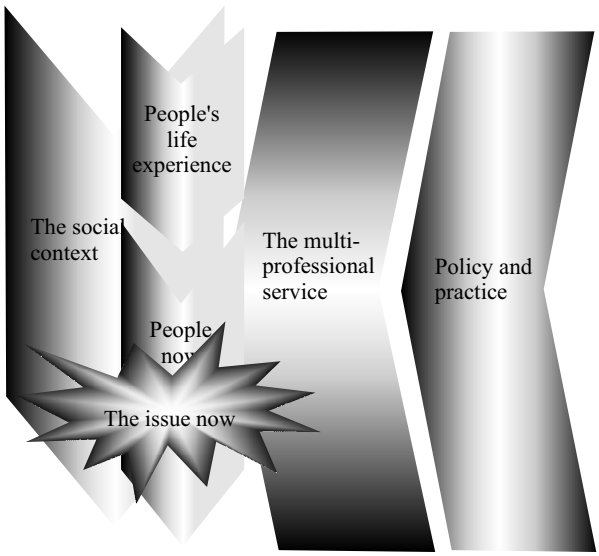
on, and it to emerges as we gain more experience. Archer (2000) proposes, moreover, that although language and interaction is important it is our practical experience of the world that allows our humanity to emerge and become our personal identity. So what we do in relation to other people is what mainly gives us an identity. In turn, this emphasises that practice is what produces reality, not what we think or theorise about.

Realist ideas amend, rather than replace, EBP by accepting social construction and the need to understand the cultural and social origin of much human action, but they also question social construction views. It accepts that we need to explain and take into account the reality of the world and the way it affects how we act. It also includes the reality of pre-existing social constructions that affect us. These change over time and you can trace the changes, but they have a good deal of stability and are the basis on which many people carry out their social interactions.

How do we connect theory and practice?

My fourth issue was about how we connect theory and practice. At one time, we assumed that a theory told you what to do, and the main job was to apply theoretical ideas in practice. However, people have found this difficult to do, and this assumption also ignores the possibility that theory, according to social construction, empowerment and realist ideas, needs to change according to what clients need and want. How, then, can workers find a way through these complexities to think theoretically as they practice? Increasingly, process understanding helps us think about what we are doing.

Figure 3 - Complex processes in social work



This involves seeing all situations as constantly developing. I have set out some of the things going on in this situation in Fig. 3 (Payne 2005). At least five factors are relevant. The first is the particular situation that the worker is involved and trying to help with. This will have its own trajectory of development. What happens is affected by their life history. How satisfied they are with and supported by their life and relationships, for example, will affect how they react. Third, there is the social context, the family and community, that all this is part of. We tend to see this as a context in which our acts of social work take place, but this also is moving on and affected by factors outside our work. Thus, ist is a moving and developing context, rather than a static one. This context will continue beyond our involvement. Our practice usually relates to other social services, very often multiprofessional services. Many different colleagues all have their duties and are part of the philosophy of the services and care policies, regulated by the requirements of funders and the government or other regulators. How these people interact together and how their occupations see their roles and activities constantly changes and develops as professional knowledge and policy decisions accumulate and interact with each other.

At any one time, all these factors contribute to a 'situation' or issue that we are trying to deal with. We can try to understand their contribution and define what is going on in order to decide how to act. However, looked at over time each factor changes at its own pace, responding to the relationships and social changes that affect it.

Recent empirical studies in Britain of how social workers understand these processes (Sheppard et al, 2000; Sheppard and Ryan, 2003) show how workers pursued two processes: critical appraisal of the situation, and then hypothesis generation, which allowed them to work out ways of acting. Critical appraisal included focused attention, querying information and not taking it for granted and making causal inferences about what is going on in a case to enable workers to make sense of it. Hypotheses were partial, about particular aspects of the case, whole-case, trying to analyse the total situation that the worker faced, and speculative, in which the worker thought out what interventions and legal or administrative procedures might be required. They then create rules of action, which give them guidelines to follow.

Contemporary debate on this topic particularly focuses on critical and reflective thinking. Fook (2002: 43) comments that reflective practice is particularly concerned with identifying a process of thinking things through, while reflexive thinking is concerned with the stance of taking into account as many different perspectives on a situation as possible, and especially different perspectives among clients and their social networks. Critical thinking means not taking for granted the present social order, but actively looking for social change. I have been working recently with a dying man whose relationship with his wife has become more conflictual, because he is blaming her behaviour for some difficulties in their marriage. I have been, in a reflective way, thinking through possible reasons why this might be and talking over explanations with him. His wife has another perspective, that he is projecting some of his behaviour onto her. Their various children think different things; being reflexive means putting these ideas into the discussions with him. Thinking critically, I am aware that some of the conflict reflects changes in attitudes to what is acceptable in gender relations;

things he took for granted as acceptable ways for men to behave are no longer acceptable in contemporary attitudes. Part of what I am doing is getting him acknowledge changes in the social order of gender relations, so that both he and his wife can agree about the right attitude, and he can say 'sorry' before he dies.

Reflective thinking originates from the work of Argyris and Schön (1974; Schön, 1983, 1987). This body of work is another aspect of the literature that seeks a way to represent the reality of the way professionals use knowledge in working with people. 'Technical rationality' describes the use of evidence in professions such as engineering, where people are using natural substances that perform in the same way in similar conditions. Even medicine uses medication, which has predictable effects on the human body; this is a technical rational application of knowledge. However, other aspects of medicine, such as communicating with patients, like social work, nursing, teaching and similar professions, uses knowledge in a more flexible way.

Reflective practice involves more than being careful to think things through and taking all the aspects of the situation into account (Payne, 2002). It implies a structured system for thinking things through either as we are taking part in the situation (Schön calls this 'reflection-in-action') or as a learning or review technique after the event ('reflection-on-action'), which might improve future practice. Jasper's (2003) ERA (experience-reflection-action) model (Figure 3) provides an underlying structure: you experience something, you reflect on it, and this causes you to take action in a particular way. All see it as a cycle, starting from describing the situation, through analysing it and ending by working out the implications of your analysis for taking action. Boud and Knights usefully emphasise the importance of attending to different aspects of the situation. Social work practice theory operates in the area between 'so what?' and 'now what?', where our conclusions about the situation in front of us is converted into a plan of action that takes our assessment into account. We could ask whether a particular theory has something to tell us about situations like this, or we could apply a theory's practice prescriptions to tell us what actions we could take; or both. Theories of the client world are relevant to the description part of the diagram, to the right, because they might give us information about clients and their social environments that would inform our assessment.

It is not easy to develop reflective practice. Goodman (1984, cited by Jasper, 2003) suggests that skills in doing so might be explicitly developed through three stages:

- Reflection to achieve specific objectives, such as fitting in with agency practices and policies;
- Reflection on the relationship between principles and practice, the area where practice theory becomes integrated into practice;
- Reflection to incorporate ethical and political concerns, which might be particularly relevant to critical and feminist practice but includes concern for the underlying politics of all theories.

In nursing, where reflective practice is incorporated into learning development systems, ideas such as using diaries and journals, and selecting 'critical' or particularly significant incidents from a case or area of practice can help to focus reflection (Jasper, 2003, 2004).

Conclusion

My main focus here has been on general debates about social work that underlie theoretical developments. Practice theories, which offer models of how to practice that reflect present debates, have developed most strongly in areas that reflect these general theoretical debates. In particular:

• Theories using social construction ideas have developed using ideas about focusing on solutions, strengths and possibilities that you can already see in what the client is able to do;

• Theories using cognitive-behavioural ideas have developed using clearly-defined outcomes and procedures that involve clients in specific activities to improve their situation;

•Empowerment and anti-discrimination theories have developed to promote an emphasis on viewing your client's situation through a 'lens' that focuses on discrimination and oppression that your clients and the social groups that the are part of have suffered in the past; understanding that past oppression helps you understand the barriers that may exist in their lives and social environment that prevent them from making the best of their personal and social resources;

• Critical theories are developing strongly at present, to help social workers examine and work with factors to transform the social factors that exclude our clients from satisfying social relationships.

The issues I have raised are not new issues, and I have suggested that they are inevitably always part of social work debate. However, their importance in current debate suggests that social work is trying to develop its theoretical base to help us face the problems that our clients and our societies are presenting us with. Each country has a different welfare regime; aims and practices vary around the world. It is my approach that to practice well, is to practise theoretically, by being clear about the ideas that form our practice and by being clear about the ways in which our practice is constructed, with us, our clients and our agencies playing a crucial part.

Bibliography

Archer, M. S., *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Archer, M. S., *Being Human: the Problem of Agency*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Argyris, C. and Schön, D. A., *Theory in Practice: Increasing Professional Effectiveness*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1974.

Beresford, P. and Croft, S., 'Service users' knowledges and the social construction of social work', *Journal of Social Work*, 1(3), 2001, pp. 295-316.

Burr, V., *Social Constructionism*, (2nd edn), London, Routledge, 2003.

Dominelli L., "Anti-oppressive practice", in Adams, R., Dominelli, L. and Payne, M. (eds) *Social Work: Themes, Issues and Critical Debates*, (2nd edn), Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2002.

Evans, D. and Kearney, J., *Working in Social Care: A Systemic Approach*, Aldershot, Arena, 1996.

Fairclough, N., *Discourse and Social Change*, Cambridge, Polity, 1992.

Fook, J., *Social Work: Critical Theory and Practice*, London, Sage, 2002.

Gomm, R. and Davies, C. (eds.), *Using Evidence in Health and Social Care*, London, Sage, 2000.

Goodman, J., "Reflection and teacher education: a case study and theoretical analysis",*Interchange*, 15 (1984), pp. 9-26.

Houston, S., "Beyond social constructionism: critical realism and social work", *British Journal of Social Work*, 31(6), 2001, pp. 845-61.

Howe, D., *An Introduction to Social Work Theory,* Aldershot, Berks, Wildwood House, 1987.

Jasper, M., *Beginning Reflective Practice* , Cheltenham, Nelson Thornes, 2004.

Jasper, M., "Using journals and diaries within reflective practice", in Bulman, C. and Schutz, S. (eds), *Reflective Practice in Nursing*, (3rd edn), Oxford, Blackwell, 2004, pp. 94-112.

Karvinen, S., Pösö, T. and Satka, M., *Reconstructing Social Work Research* , Jyväskylä, SoPhi, 1999.

Laming, H. (Lord)(2003) *The Victoria Climbi é Inquiry: Report of an Inquiry* ,London, TSO, 2003. http://www.victoria-climbie-inquiry.org.uk/finreport/finreport.htm

Morén, S. and Blom, B., "Explaining human change: on generative mechanisms in social work practice", *Journal of Critical Realism*, **2**(1), 2003, pp. 37-61.

Parton, N., *The Politics of Child Abuse*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1985.

Payne, M., "Routes to and through clienthood and their implications for practice", *Practice* **6**(3), 1993, pp. 169-80.

Payne, M. , *What is Professional Social Work?* Birmingham, Venture, 1996.

Payne, M., "Social work theories and reflective practice" in Adams, R., Dominelli, L and Payne, M. (eds) *Social Work: themes, Issues and Critical Debates*, (2nd edn),Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2002, pp. 123-38.

Payne, M., "Social Work Process" in Adams, R., Dominelli, L and Payne, M.(eds), *Social Work Futures: Changes and Connections*, Basingstoke, Palgrave,2005.

Polanyi, M., *Personal Knowledge*, Chicago University of Chicago Press, 1958.

Schön, D. A., *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* ,New York, Basic Books, 1983.

Schön, D. A., *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1987.

Sheppard, M. and Ryan, K., "Practitioners as rule using analysts: a further development of process knowledge in social work", *British Journal of Social Work* 33(2), 2003, pp. 157-76.

Sheppard, M., Newstead, S., di Caccavo, A. and Ryan, K., "Reflexivity and the development of process knowledge in social work: a classification and empirical study", *British Journal of Social Work*, 30(4), 2000, pp. 465-88.

Simpson, J. A. and Weiner, E. S. C. (eds),*The Oxford English Dictionary* (2 nd edn), Oxford, Clarendon House, 1989.

Stenson, K. and Gould, N., "A comment on 'A framework for theory in social work'" by Whittington and Holland', *Issues in Social Work Education* **6**(1), 1986, pp. 41-5.

Whittington, C. and Holland, R., "A framework for theory in social work", *Issues in Social Work Education* **5**(1), 1985, pp.25-50.